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Maduro in court as Washington calls the shots

• Captured leader, his wife plead not guilty to drug trafficking charges • His successor softens her tone, expresses willingness to work with US • Latin American leaders riled by US president's threats hit back • Moscow, Beijing, Tehran slam Washington's actions; allies in London and Paris also wary

NEW YORK: Toppled Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro pleaded not guilty on Monday to narcotics charges after his stunning capture by the US rattled world leaders and left officials in Caracas scrambling to respond.

On Monday morning, Maduro — his hands zip-tied — and his wife were escorted by armed guards in tactical gear from a Brooklyn detention center to a helicopter bound for the Manhattan federal court.

The 63-year-old pleaded innocent in New York federal court to four criminal counts: narco-terrorism, cocaine importation conspiracy and possession of machine guns and destructive devices.

"I am innocent. I am not guilty. I am a decent man. I am still president of my country," Maduro said through an interpreter, before being cut off by US District Judge Alvin Hellerstein.

His wife Cilia Flores also pleaded not guilty. The next court date was set for March 17. Dozens of protesters, both pro- and anti-Maduro, gathered outside the courthouse before the half-hour hearing.

Maduro is accused of overseeing a cocaine-trafficking network that partnered with violent groups, including Mexico's Sinaloa and Zetas cartels, Colombian FARC rebels and Venezuela's

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Regime change redux: Editorial on Page 6

Oil fluctuates, Venezuela's bonds surge after US raid: Page 9

AGENTS of the US Drug Enforcement Administration escort deposed Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro out of a helicopter, for a hearing at a Manhattan courthouse. Maduro and his wife both pleaded not guilty to charges of narco-terrorism, drug trafficking and money laundering.—Reuters

At UNSC, Pakistan calls for restraint and dialogue

By Our Correspondent

WASHINGTON: Pakistan on Monday expressed "profound concern" over developments in Venezuela, warning that escalating tensions in the country posed risks to regional and international peace and security.

The remarks were made at an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) convened to discuss the recent developments in Venezuela. This was also the council's first meeting of the year, with Somalia in the chair.

Pakistan's Acting Permanent Representative to the UN, Ambassador Usman Jadoon, said that at a time when the world was already facing multiple

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Process to appoint NA Opp leader to start afresh: Ayaz

Amir Dogar presents documents to speaker confirming withdrawal of cases involving Omar Ayub

By Iftikhar A. Khan

ISLAMABAD: National Assembly Speaker Sardar Ayaz Sadiq on Monday said that the process for appointment of the opposition leader will be initiated afresh.

During a meeting with PTI Chief Whip Amir Dogar, who called on him to discuss the unusual delay in the opposition leader's appointment, Mr Sadiq said that the rules on the matter were clear.

During the meeting, Mr Dogar presented documents confirming withdrawal of cases involving to former Opposition Leader Omar Ayub from the courts.

He also reiterated demand for Mehmood Achakzai to be appointed as the Opposition Leader. In response, Speaker Sardar Ayaz Sadiq emphasised that all proceedings will be conducted strictly in accordance with rules, laws, and the Constitution. He said he would inform the House about this matter in the upcoming session of the National Assembly.

The development comes around a month after the NA Secretariat sent a letter to Mr Dogar, seeking details about the status of cases concerning Mr Ayub. The letter said the provision of details in writing was necessary for completing the process for appointing an opposition leader in the lower house of parliament. The post of the opposition leader in the NA has been vacant since the disqualification of Mr Ayub by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) in August last year following his conviction for alleged role in May 9 violent protests.

The same month, incarcerated PTI founder Imran Khan had nominated Mr Achakzai for the post of opposition leader and despite the PTI's insistence for his appointment, his notification

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PTI Chief Whip Amir Dogar hands over a letter to National Assembly Speaker Ayaz Sadiq.—APP

Bail denied to Indian Muslim students held without trial

By Our Correspondent

NEW DELHI: India's Supreme Court on Monday denied bail to student activists Umar Khalid and Sharjil Imam, who have been held in prison for more than five years without trial.

Police accused them of conspiracy to incite deadly clashes in the capital that killed 53 people, mostly Muslims. They were held under strict anti-terror laws that make bail difficult. They denied the charges and unsuccessfully applied for bail in courts over the years.

The court, however, granted bail to five other activists who were also arrested in the same case. Just last week, a group of US Congressmen and Senators wrote a letter to the Indian ambassador in Washington expressing "continued concern" over the activists' "prolonged pre-trial detention".

Reports said the judgement in the Delhi riots larger conspiracy case establishes a "hierarchy of culpability" among accused persons to justify its denial of bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam and the grant of freedom to others, including Gulfisha Fatima.

The judgement held that treating all the accused identically merely because the case against them arises from the same set of facts would lead to a violation of Article 21 of the Constitution, which enshrines the fundamental right to life and liberty. The State has to identify and present their case individually and separately in a court examining the accused's bail

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Intel agencies, CTD foil major terror plot in Karachi

• Around 2,000kg of explosives mounted on truck-based IED seized; three suspects in custody • CTD officials claim separatist outfit involved, explosive material transported from Afghanistan

By Imtiaz Ali

KARACHI: Intelligence and law enforcement agencies have thwarted a massive terrorist plot in Karachi, seizing a huge cache of explosives, cylinders, plastic containers, and several types of detonators mounted on a 'ready-to-explode' truck, in an operation conducted on the outskirts of the port city.

The operation — jointly conducted by the intelligence agencies and the Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD) — averted a potentially major tragedy, with a staggering 2,000kg of explosive material being defused.

In total, the seized explosives comprised 30 plastic drums and five cylinders, rigged with different detonators.

The details of the operation, carried out in Hub, were shared at a press conference held at the Central Police Office by CTD Additional IGP Zulfiqar Larik and DIG Azfar Mahesar.

They said the complex intelligence

Shades of Marriott bombing in failed terror plot: Situationer on Page 3

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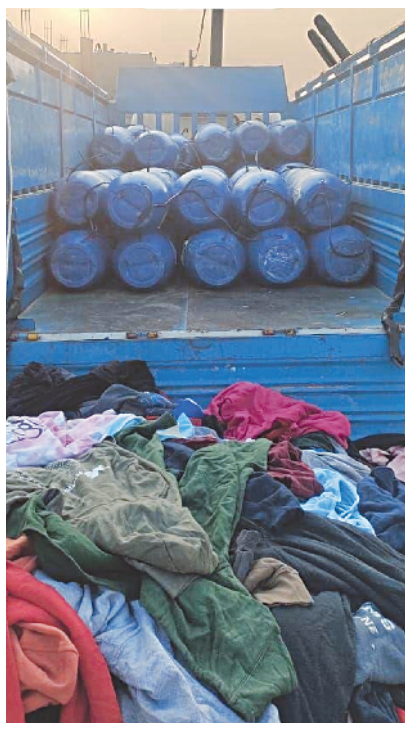

BARRELS containing explosive material were hidden in the truck under a pile of clothes.—Courtesy CTD

Despite risks, most Muslim states still back Gaza force

Diplomats say the choice is a difficult one; warn that Palestinian blood will continue to flow in the absence of proposed ISF

By Anwar Iqbal

WASHINGTON: Despite deep reservations and fears of domestic backlash, most Muslim-majority countries associated with the Gaza peace process want the proposed International Stabilisation Force (ISF) to succeed, arguing that only such a force can ensure the security and survival of Palestinians in the besieged enclave, diplomats involved in the discussions told *Dawn*.

"Israel has already killed [more than] 70,000 people in Gaza, and only an international force with a clear mandate can stop this genocide," said a diplomat from a Muslim nation, directly associated with the process.

Another diplomat acknowledged that participation in the ISF would place contributing states in an extremely difficult position, but said the alternatives were even bleaker.

"We know we would be pushed into a very difficult situation if we joined the ISF," he said. "But the alternative is even worse — uninterrupted bloodshed in Gaza, and that's not acceptable to us."

A third diplomat said governments were under no illusion about the political costs at home. "We realise it will not be a popular war. We will be criticised at home too, but we have to get involved," he said.

The ISF is a central pillar of a US-backed plan for "Phase 2" in Gaza, aimed at stabilising the territory after a ceasefire, training a Palestinian police force, overseeing demilitarisation, and enabling limited reconstruction.

Several Muslim countries — including Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkiye, the United Arab Emirates, Indonesia, Azerbaijan and Pakistan — are involved in discussions around the initiative, though most have stopped short of firm

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ON OTHER PAGES

Bulls take PSX to new peak

For no apparent positive triggers, the Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX) extended its bullish spell in the first session of the week as bulls continued their charge, catapulting the benchmark KSE-100 index to an intraday high of 184,000, a gain of almost 5,000 points in a single session on Monday. The index, however, settled at 182,408.24, up 3,373.31 points or 1.88 per cent. **Page 9**

Palestine embassy opens in UK

The embassy of Palestine was officially inaugurated in London in a short ceremony on Monday, hailed by its ambassador as a 'profound milestone' in British-Palestinian relations. The official upgrading of the mission to embassy status came after the UK announced it would recognise the State of Palestine in September 2025, along with several other countries, including Australia and Canada. **Page 11**

'Visible' action on Afghanistan-based terrorists sought

• Pakistan, China pledge to move forward on CPEC 2.0 in joint statement issued after foreign ministers' strategic dialogue in Beijing; reaffirm commitment to security cooperation • Agree Kashmir dispute should be resolved 'peacefully in accordance with UN Charter'

Dawn Report

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan and China on Monday issued a joint communique calling for more "visible and verifiable" actions to dismantle and eliminate all terrorist organisations based in Afghanistan, and to prevent them from using Afghan territory for militancy against any other country.

The joint statement came after the conclusion of the 7th round of the Pakistan-China Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue in Beijing, which was attended by Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, with both sides also agreeing to strengthen bilateral cooperation, including building an "upgraded version 2.0 of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)".

"The two sides called for more visible and verifiable actions to dismantle and eliminate all terrorist organisations based in Afghanistan which continue to pose serious threats to regional and global security, and prevent terrorist organisations from using the Afghan territory for terrorism against any other country and to endanger any other country," the communique said.

The statement added that the two sides agreed to maintain close communication and coordination on the Afghan issue, and to work with the international community to "encourage the Afghan government to build an inclusive political framework, adopt moderate policies, focus on development, pursue good-neighbourliness, and play a constructive role in helping Afghanistan achieve stable development and integrate into the international community".

ISHAQ DAR and Wang Yi co-chair the Pakistan-China Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue..—X/ @ForeignOfficePk

China commended the measures taken by Pakistan to combat terrorism and for the safety of Chinese personnel, projects and institutions in the country.

"China fully recognised the significant contributions and huge sacrifices that Pakistan made in combating terrorism over the years," the statement said.

Both sides "reiterated their commitment to combating terrorism in all its forms and manifestations with zero tolerance, and agreed to further deepen cooperation on counter-terrorism and security", while making concerted efforts to ensure that "China-Pakistan Belt and Road cooperation advances in a secure and smooth manner".

Calling on the international community to strengthen counter-terrorism cooperation, the two countries also expressed firm opposition to double standards on counter-terrorism.

Both countries further "expressed readiness to continue leveraging the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan trilateral foreign ministers' dialogue", as well as the China Bangladesh-Pakistan cooperation mechanism to "deliver new outcomes".

Enhance cooperation

The communique further read that the two sides agreed to build an upgraded version 2.0 of CPEC, align development plans and priorities, and deepen cooperation in key sectors, including industry, agriculture and mining, along with strategic and political coordination, trade, defence and security, investment, cybersecurity, science and technology, technical and vocational training education, financial and banking sectors, and people-to-people exchanges.

Pakistan and China marked the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations with the launch of commemorative activities

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